

## ***‘Very Real, and Very Haunting’: Reporting on a Man Who Set Himself on Fire***

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**Highlight:** David Buckel was a lawyer and environmental advocate. Trying to figure out why he took his life only raised more questions. Then I found a clue.

### **Body**

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On a beautiful Saturday in April, I got an alarming news alert on my phone: A man had died after setting himself on fire in Prospect Park, Brooklyn. His name was David Buckel. He was a prominent L.G.B.T. rights lawyer who had become an advocate for the environment.

When I came to work after the weekend, I was assigned to report a longer story — a “deep dive” — on Mr. Buckel’s life and death. [It ran on Tuesday’s front page.](#)

The Times reports on suicides when they are exceptionally newsworthy. Not only was Mr. Buckel’s death one of the few cases of political self-immolation in the United States since the 1960s — when the [image of a monk in flames](#) in Saigon touched off a spate of self-immolations — it was perhaps the first of its kind in the name of climate change. “My early death by fossil fuel,” he wrote in a suicide letter, “reflects what we are doing to ourselves.”

My job was to answer a deceptively simple question: Why? Mr. Buckel’s message was clear enough, but why did he take such a drastic step to make it heard?

Over a few weeks, while gathering information on his life, I put that question to many people: Mr. Buckel’s husband and the two women with whom they co-parented a college-age daughter; his relatives and friends; former legal colleagues; people he worked with at [the compost site](#) he operated in Red Hook, Brooklyn, after leaving the law.

What arose from those interviews was the picture of a deeply committed, kind and socially conscious individual—and more questions. Mr. Buckel was known for being cautious — “he would not ever leap into something without giving it the utmost consideration and thought,” said a former colleague, Adam Aronson — yet he had set himself on fire. He was exceptionally private, but had staged a dramatic public death. He was “hyperaware of others,” according to his husband, Terry Kaelber, yet he had not said goodbye.

“It’s very real and very haunting,” said another colleague, Evan Wolfson.

I began to think that the only thing I would be able to convey after all the interviews, after reading his legal briefs and articles and walking through Brooklyn in his footsteps, was that sense of mystery.

Then I found a clue. For months, people told me, Mr. Buckel had been distressed about climate change and the rollback of environmental protections under President Trump — and two weeks before he died, he had become particularly agitated.

I went back through the news and saw it: Precisely two weeks before Mr. Buckel took his life, the Environmental Protection Agency [announced](#) it wanted to repeal Obama-era rules on vehicle emissions. For Mr. Buckel, the

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potential consequences — more gas guzzlers on the road, more fuel consumption, more carbon dioxide in the air — might have been devastating. I closely examined his suicide letter, which he emailed to several news organizations the morning of his death, including The New York Times.

Sure enough, Mr. Buckel had also sent it directly to [Hiroko Tabuchi](#), the main Times reporter who covered the E.P.A.’s plans. (She told me they had no prior contact.)

Mr. Buckel carefully planned his death, and in his letter, he said he hoped it would lead to “expanded action” on pollution. Rather than calling on the administration to change course, he focused on people: “Although solutions lay partly in laws, no power will match that of individuals in large numbers who change their everyday choices and reduce the harm they cause.”

Many questions about Mr. Buckel’s death will never be answered, including ones about his mental health. Of course, those who knew him raised those, too.

As I once heard Joan Didion say at a reading, the personal and the political cannot be separated, but are entwined in a double-helix model. That was particularly true for Mr. Buckel. It was not for me to say where his politics ended, and his personal pain began.

But I know his story will stay with me.

The news of David Buckel’s death flashed on people’s phones. Then it disappeared. Just hours after, people picnicked in the park. Soon, the 24-hour news cycle moved on, too. For me, like so many who knew him, that will not be so easy to do.

PHOTO: A makeshift memorial for David Buckel at the site of his suicide in Prospect Park. (PHOTOGRAPH BY Christopher Lee for The New York Times FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES)

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